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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002348

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SUBJECT: HARD-LINE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT MADURO NAMED
FOREIGN MINISTER

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. According to a well-placed BRV official, President Chavez will soon name National Assembly president Nicholas Maduro, an anti-American aparatchik, to be his new Foreign Minister. Maduro can be expected to inject new, but continued hostile, energy into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has been run for months by caretakers and the ailing outgoing FM Ali Rodriguez. As National Assembly President over the last thirty-plus months, Maduro has leveled unfounded accusations at the USG while firmly spearheading legislative efforts to attack democratic institutions in Venezuela. A former labor leader with strong ties to Chavez, Maduro is predisposed to do even more damage to the BRV's relations with the U.S. End Summary.

Maduro In; Rodriguez Out

¶2. (C) Vice-President Chief of Staff Rene Arreaza called Charge' August 8 to convey that President of the National Assembly Nicholas Maduro would be named Foreign Minister. Arreaza reported that outgoing Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez is too sick to continue in office. Rodriguez has served as Foreign Minister since November 21, 2004, but has suffered from prostrate cancer, heart trouble, and recently underwent knee replacement surgery in Cuba. Maduro will be Chavez's sixth Foreign Minister in less than eight years.

The Anti-Americans' Anti-American

¶3. (C) Maduro was elected President of the National Assembly in January 2004 and has used this position as a platform to deliver some of the BRV's most outrageous, public anti-American attacks. He is a standing member of the BRV's Leadership Committee (Comando Tactico Nacional). To cite just a few of Maduro's many recent broadsides aimed at the USG, Maduro:

- blamed a February 2006 trucking strike on "international agencies" and speculated on CIA involvement;
- warmly welcomed an Iranian parliamentary delegation in February 2006 and criticized the U.S. government for its policy on Iran's nuclear program; and,
- attributed in January 2005 tensions between Colombia and Venezuela to the "black hand of the United States."

Maduro has also traveled extensively as President of the National Assembly, especially to the Middle East, in an effort to promote the BRV's "anti-Empire" campaign.

14. (C) Since the opposition's boycott of the December 2005 parliamentary elections, Maduro has presided over an opposition-less legislature made up exclusively of Chavistas and two allied parties. Maduro has loyally and firmly pushed through Chavez's legislative program, including laws that stacked the Venezuelan Supreme Court, restricted public protests, and infringed on press freedom. As President of the National Assembly, Maduro declined to meet with Embassy officials, although he did make himself available to some visiting U.S. congressional delegations and some Department officials, including WHA/AND Director French. He was a sometime participant in the U.S.-Venezuelan bipartisan legislative forum, or "Boston Group," when the BRV was more open to USG contacts.

A Labor Leader with Deep Chavista Roots

15. (SBU) With the help of the Socialist League party, Maduro started his professional career as a Caracas Metro driver. He subsequently founded the Metro labor union and rose to become the coordinator of the pro-government Bolivarian Federation of Workers (FBT). He ran unsuccessfully in 1999 as Chavez's candidate for President of Venezuela's largest labor union, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV). Raised in a prominent Democratic Action (AD) family, Maduro moved to the extreme left. He received in 1986 a scholarship from the David Nieves Socialist League political party and studied one year in Cuba. Upon his return, he served as a member of the Socialist League's National Committee and the party's Caracas Regional Committee.

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16. (SBU) Maduro was a civilian coordinator in the failed February 4, 1992, coup attempt against former President Carlos Andres Perez. He first met President Chavez when he visited Chavez at Yare Prison in December 1993. Maduro served as one of the government's six representatives to the 2002-2003 OAS mediation efforts between the government and opposition. Maduro was elected to the National Assembly from Caracas (the Capital District) and is married to Chavista National Assembly member Cilia Flores. Flores is currently serving as a BRV "special envoy" in Lebanon where she has vocally criticized U.S. policy.

17. (SBU) The new foreign minister was born November 23, 1962 in Caracas. He and Cilia Flores have one teenage son. Cilia also is the mother of three sons (ages 26, 17, and 15) from a previous marriage. He and his wife consider themselves non-Catholic Christians. Maduro played guitar for a rock band ("Engima") during the 1970's and reportedly turned down a baseball contract from a U.S. Major League Baseball scout.

WHITAKER